

HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 5: The Early Daoists – Hermits, Shen Dao, and Laozi

Section 6: Laozi's Analysis: Artificial distinction & desires

- Focus on difference between *natural* and 欲 *social yu*^{desires}
- Laozi clusters four things and reacts negatively to all: 1. naming, 2 language distinctions, 3. desires, 4. 為 *wei*^{deem:treat as}
- The *Laozi* avoids certain words: 辨 *bian*^{distinctions}, 是 *shi*^{right} and 非 *fei*^{wrong}
 - Focuses on how 名 *ming*^{names} always come in opposites
 - That the social world knows to treat the beautiful as 'beautiful' thus the 'ugly' (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 2)
 - Every name comes with a distinction that creates two terms
 - Unlike Mozi, Laozi reacts negatively to these 辯 *bian*^{distinctions}
 - Society is 'training' you to view things with these opposites
 - One exception to the 2-part analysis of opposites
 - The five colors stupefy the people's eyes (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 12)
 - The five tones desensitize the people's ears (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 12)
 - The five flavors numb the people's mouths (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 12)
 - Still the same point: we restrict people's perceptions by sorting into these categories
- Distinction between 美 *měi*^{beautiful} and 惡 *è*^{ugly}
 - With practice you can become as proficient at making these distinctions as a Sage
 - However, beyond just making distinctions, you should also *value* the 'correct' class
 - You must learn the correct desires to go with the distinctions
- Laozi's innovation is in seeing the desires generated by names/distinctions

HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

- Laozi uses the metaphor of the uncarved block of wood for the state prior to social domination
 - Cutting equals 辯 *bìan* ^{distinguishing} - carving into social usefulness
 - When it's cut, it becomes artificial (偽 *wéi* ^{artificial}), an artifact and no longer natural
 - The nameless, uncarved block just represents freedom from desire
 - To remove this social dominance, you need to erase the names
- The result of this process is 為 *wéi* ^{treating as}
 - Treating things in a certain way because they belong to a socially structured category
 - You should forget all 4: no names, no distinctions, no desires and no 為 *wéi* ^{treating as}
 - This is 無為 *wú wéi* ^{no treating as}